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Engaging and Assessing Students with Google Docs

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Imagine your perfect class. It's probably in a comfortable classroom with the ideal number of students, all of whom love the subject as much as you do. The students likely are engaged and contributing to a lively discussion, maintaining eye contact with you—and maybe even smiling. The scenario might differ for various professors, but one thing is certain: In a perfect class, students are not using their laptops to check email, the score of the game, their social networking news feeds, or anything else unrelated to the class material.

One potential solution to inappropriate student laptop use is banning laptops from the classroom, but that just removes the temptations of the Internet; it does not necessarily increase student engagement. By having students use their laptops to contribute to what is shown on the main screen in a class-

room, however, students may become more engaged, may use their computers for something directly related to class, and may feel a greater sense of autonomy in the learning process.

Google Docs is a free online program that allows multiple users to edit the same document at the same time. Teachers and professors from elementary school to college already use Google Docs, and its applicability to legal education is similarly broad. It can be used to manipulate traditional word processing documents, spreadsheets, slide presentations, drawings, and forms. This article focuses on word processing documents.

One easy application of Google Docs in an academic support setting is to help students understand IRAC by editing an imperfect exam answer. The professor either creates a new document within Google Docs or uploads an already-existing student answer to critique. The professor then chooses

how many students will participate in editing the answer and invites those students to participate simply by clicking the blue “share” button at the top of the page and entering the students’ email addresses. The students then receive a link to the document via email. (All of this can be done prior to class.) Once the students click the link, the same answer the professor shows on the main screen in class can appear on each participating student’s computer.

Breaking students down into small groups, the professor can task each group with one part of the editing process: for example, rewrite the issues to be more narrowly focused; edit the rules to be more concise; incorporate more specific facts into the analyses; or move the conclusions to their correct positions. Once the groups have discussed their strategies, the class can reconvene as a whole, with each group making edits on the main document as the professor and other students watch, comment, and ask ques-

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tions. Once students are finished editing, the professor may also ask each group to highlight one recurring segment of IRAC within the document (e.g., all issues in blue, all rules in yellow, and so on) to demonstrate the repetitive structure. If the professor desires a more Socratic environment, he or she can assign editing tasks to individual students rather than to small groups.

This is only one example, and it can be easily tweaked to suit academic support, legal writing, and doctrinal courses. Because Google Docs can be used to collaborate on and edit a document in real time regardless of whether participants are in the same room or different counties, professors may also use Google Docs to assign group homework or as an assignment in a distance learning course. This feature also allows professors to involve others in the collaborative editing process—such as a bar grader or an attorney practicing in the field at issue—without asking them to physically attend the class.

There are no anonymous edits; Google Docs tracks each student’s contribution by name. This keeps students accountable for what they write, and if the work occurs outside of class it also ensures that no single

member of the class or small group carries the majority of the workload. The software saves each version of the document so the professor can check progress before the final product is due.

Students are not the only ones who benefit from using Google Docs. For example, professors can use the software to collaborate on rubrics or to calibrate their grading. One professor can upload a sample exam answer, and other professors can make comments, offer suggested scores, and explain how they reached those numbers. There is no need to email documents back and forth and keep track of which version is the most recent. There is also a “chat” feature that allows document editors to make comments to each other outside of the document itself, much like traditional instant messaging services.

If you are looking for a way to increase student engagement and add assessment to your program without adding more grading work, Google Docs may be a solution. It is relatively intuitive and user-friendly, but simply entering “Google Docs tutorials” in a search engine will uncover many free resources that can help you get started or inspire you to use the program in new

ways. Before long, that perfect class you imagined may become a reality.